

WITH THE PLAYERS BY ALAN DALE



THEY are a saucy lot—those Empire Theatre Bohemians. They are not only saucy, but they are devilish, conchiermon. The men are possessed with the wild, unalloyed insolence of the tabby tomcat, and the women own the desperately spangled chic of the New England spinster at a masquerade ball. They indulge in feathery badinage that sounds like "sass" as they utter it, and occasionally in the fierce lemonsade intoxication of their wit, you feel that they are about to become what Elizabeth Ann Bellwood would call "very rude persons."

In "adapting" Henri Mürger's "Vie de Bohème"—one of the most delightful Parisian entertainments you could find—Mr. Clyde Fitch was not daring enough to announce to the public what he really did. He was determined that people should make all discoveries without his assistance, and this I am afraid that people will not do. I therefore feel it my bounden duty to throw a little light upon a signally important question of location. Mr. Fitch, timidly, reverently, but trustfully declares that the scenes of his "Bohemia" take place in Paris, with the exception of the prologue, which is spoken in Durand's country place, near Paris.

It grieves me to call Mr. Fitch to order, but it is my duty. I therefore fearlessly, yet reluctantly, assert that the scenes of the Empire's "Bohemia" are not laid in Paris, but in Asbury Park, N. J. It was a daring thing to do, but Mr. Fitch did it. I almost expected to note a Bradley trotting in to Miss Benoit's lodging-house, to see that nothing alcoholic had been smuggled in, and to insist that Mimi and Rodolph should behave themselves properly. Mr. Fitch's Mimi was an exquisitely saucy little thing, and quite as reckless as anybody could be in Asbury. You could imagine her rattling until at least 10 o'clock at night, and then reading the Family Story Paper aloud to Rodolph and the other Bohemians, sitting in prim disorder over a lordly sarsaparilla-cup, with real, wobbly pieces of ice in it.

And Musette—what an improvement she was, Clyde-Fitch-ed, to the infected Mürger article. She hadn't half a dozen lovers, and her hair was not to be bought for a new wig. But she was just as bad as she could be in Asbury Park. You can't tell me that she didn't chew gum. I know better. I'll swear that she did. She was a pert little puss, but it was the pertness of Asbury Park that didn't last long. You know full well that she will settle down and have seventeen children as soon as you have left the Empire, and that in "Bohemia" Mr. Fitch photographed merely her reckless moments. Once he caught her lacing her shoe, with her foot elevated on a chair. I hesitate to speak of this episode, because it is the only immoral incident in "Bohemia." The decadent fashion adopted by some ladies (I use the term "ladies" advisedly) of planting their foot on a chair while they fasten their boots is quite unworthy of Asbury. Better leave the boots forever unfastened than lift from the ground those portions of the human body that are built for contact with the earth. However, I don't wish to heap coals of fire on Mr. Fitch's head. This was the only time he really erred, and I want to put his conduct in the best light possible—perhaps, even in Asbury, girls have been known to place their feet in chairs. In any case, a chair is not nearly as high as a mantelpiece. Musette did not put her foot on the mantelpiece.

Phemie was a trifle less rollicking than Mimi and Musette. There was not a blot on her propriety. She neither chewed gum nor laced her shoes anywhere but on the floor. Nor did she read pernicious Family Story Paper literature—all about Ernests and Lancelots. She was a nice, quiet girl, with no nonsense about her; a maiden who could live in Asbury Park all her life without bringing the blush of shame to the cheek of innocents. The Parisian Phemie of Mürger would have been unendurable on the Empire stage. She was a regular bad lot, as they say in the classics, and kept house for any Tom, Dick or Harry without even a hint or a suspicion of a wedding ring.

Mr. Fitch's men were just as Asbury Parkian as his women. Rodolph was a clean young lad—d-d, who knew a good twenty-five-cent dinner of six courses when he saw one. You could imagine him at a delectable society discussing "What shall we do with our girls?" or "Are bloomers immoral?" He was poor, but strictly honest, and he coveted Mimi because he felt that she would make a good mother to his children. Marcel, the painter, was another of the same stamp, though a trifle saucier. He wore a brown velvet jacket to indicate his calling, for on the stage an artist without a brown velvet jacket is as utterly absurd as a wronged lady without a black dress. Marcel probably painted aplys from Asbury's beach—aplys covered from top to toe in blue marine propriety. As for Colline—well, he was the only character out of the Asbury Park picture. And don't imagine for a moment that he was in the Parisian tabeau. He was an abnormal type, a sort of Whitechapel boozier, a tipsy custer, with a "Liza" Atkins atmosphere about his garments. This was not Mr. Fitch's fault. I can't believe for an instant that Fitch prescribed for his Colline anything more alarming than orange phosphates. Mr. Dodson, who played Colline, is not yet acquainted with the rigors of Asbury Park. For an actor of his artistic perception I am surprised that he edged his way into "Bohemia" with such an inharmonious, exaggerated bearing.

Mr. Fitch wrote a glowing love story for

these saucy people, with big, thick wedding rings as the denouement. Fitch is the hope and the goal of the servants' hall. If he were an English writer all his heroines would be duchesses, and all his heroes dukes or princes, or things of that sort. He knows exactly what Susan Maria and Sarah Jane demand. His Mimi and Rodolph were a tender, loving couple, who would squeeze hands under the table in consummate bliss. Upper Broadway would vote them madmen, but the Bowery would vote upon them. They ended an atmosphere of living unhappily ever afterwards that was distinctly irritating because conventional.

In Mürger's book poor Mimi died a la Marguerite Gauthier, and the story of her death was most pathetically told. In the Empire's "Bohemia," Mimi lived, thanks to the bracing atmosphere of Asbury Park. You knew she was going to live. She was just the provoking sort of girl who would live and be unhappy ever afterward. It is easy to imagine what the sequel to this Asbury Park romance would have been. A few years after marriage this Mimi would have resorted to the letters columns of the newspapers, and you would probably have read above the signature of "Unhappy Wife" something like the following: "Will some of your readers kindly tell a miserable woman how to live on \$8 a week. I have seven little sons—all boys—and no husband drinks, though before we were married he never took anything stronger than lemonade. What can a wretched woman do? He loved, but was lured away."

Considering the New Jersey difficulties under which he labored, however, and the cook-book sentimentality from which he is always unable to steer clear, Mr. Fitch in "Bohemia" has written some very bright and entertaining dialogue, and he has introduced one or two breezy incidents that the audience last Monday night enjoyed very much. It is a pity that Fitch does not possess the dramatic instinct. He can write better and more polished English than any other American playwright with the exception of Bronson Howard. His wit is also seaworthy. It is not the negro minstrel quippery of Henry Guy Carlton, nor the laughless leaden humor of Augustus Thomas. Mr. Fitch is an educated young man, soaring aloft, but pulled perpetually to cheapness by Sarah Jane. Sarah is the bitterest enemy he has. She hangs on to his coat tails. She says to him, "Give me a heroine with violet eyes and a small waist, and a lovely big hero with a sweeping mustache and \$30,000 a year." As a rule Fitch does this. I'll do him the justice to say that he made a gallant effort to escape with "Bohemia." He tried hard to get to the Quartier Latin in Paris, but—alas!—he landed in Asbury Park. Fitch lacks spine. He is all soft, spongy body. His humor is lost and his polish is dulled for want of the backbone upon which to display them.

As for the Empire Stock Company—well, I think you may have discovered long before this that it is an organization that I cherish. It is a company that the metropolitans should feel proud of, but its actors and actresses are not fitted to interpret a play like "Bohemia." The good old days when an actor could play Hamlet one night and a farce-comedy comedian the next night are dead and gone. I say that they were "good old days" because it is the fashion to laud the times that are no more, and I may as well be fashionable. Managers are beginning to realize the fact that special plays demand special people. There is no earthly reason—except the traditional one—why your leading lady should invariably get the principal part in every play you produce, simply because she happens to be your leading lady. What could have been more absurd than the spectacle of Viola Allen posing as Mürger's Mimi, even as Clyde Fitch's Mimi. Miss Allen is cut out for the role of a gentlewoman or a society creature. She can play nothing else. She cannot give you even the faintest notion of a Parisian grisette or an Asbury Park Mamie or Sadie. She is hopelessly out of her element in such parts, and she was utterly swamped by "Bohemia."

Henry Miller, if he is designed for anything at all, must be a stocky hero in a play with "situations." My own idea—though I hesitate to express it—is that Mr. Miller is the actor par excellence for melodrama. He wants something to rescue him. He is actually afflicted with rescue-mania, and in a direct melodrama, built on "The War of Wealth" lines, he would be completely happy. Mr. Miller has his admirers. I've never met any of them, but still I am convinced that he has them. You know that there are such things as silent admirers, who let concealment, like a worm in the bud, prey on their damask cheeks. Those are Miller's adherents. He is not built for "Bohemia," or for anything of its ilk. The same remarks will apply to Faversham.

As the coming week promises to be a very light one, I am going to visit a number of very prominent New York theatres, that I find I have never yet inspected. I have read of at least a dozen New York playhouses of the interior of which I am blandly ignorant. Strange to say, I have never been inside of Canary & Lederer's magnificent Winter garden, in Forty-second street, mention of which appears on all the letter-heads of the firm. Nor have I seen Frank B. Murrin's handsome playhouse at Forty-second street and Lexington avenue. The superb \$500,000 arena, announced a long time ago by Rodolph Aronson for erection in Forty-ninth street, must be ready by this time. This was built after original Parisian models, and I must buy my tickets.

A strange yearning comes over me to see Nat Goodwin's theatre, which, I believe, is somewhere on Broadway, between Twenty-third and Thirty-third streets, and to take a

gaze at the sumptuous amusement temple built on Thirty-fourth street, by Neil Burgess, on the site where the church used to be. Augustus Pitou is also the owner of a playhouse which I have never seen, and there are a couple of very lordly houses in One Hundred and Twenty-fifth street, which, I understand, have very seriously interfered with the business of the Columbus Theatre and the Harlem Opera House. Messrs. Gilmore & Tompkins's well-known "craque driver" is, they tell me, simply "turning 'em away." I must find out where it is and go there.

As for J. M. Hill's Fifth Avenue Theatre—the only Fifth Avenue Theatre on Fifth avenue—I hear that it is not yet thoroughly dry. I shall wait a week or two before going there. What is the use of running the risk of pneumonia by entering a half-completed theatre when there are so many good old playhouses that have been standing for at least two years? It is too early yet to talk of Professor Herrmann's brand new temple on Fifty-ninth street, overlooking Central Park. Its contemplated erection was only announced a few days ago, so there is no use scheduling an evening there before next Monday week. I understand that they are working at it by night and day—more particularly by night, I presume, for nobody has seen the workmen.

There are a few other playhouses unvisited by me, but I can't recall the names. It isn't worth while trying to do so, for others will be announced shortly. It costs \$180 to build a theatre on paper in New York. I believe you can get three for \$5 if you go about it in the right way. It is not very expensive, but it is a dolly, rational form of amusement, very popular between seasons. I anticipate at least twenty new theatres during the coming Summer. Managers generally build them on their return from Europe. It kills time during the tedious transatlantic crossing. Only those managers who suffer from seasickness fail to build theatres. Augustine Daly is a very bad traveller, and for that reason his sole playhouse is at Broadway and Thirtieth street. Charles Frohman is another sufferer and consequently cannot get beyond the Empire. There is a sea-sick cure, however, that, if taken religiously for three days before sailing from Liverpool, will enable managers to build all the theatres they desire, during the journey home.

The "Romeo and Juliet" epidemic is now raging, and it is very catching. The latest Juliet is at Palmer's Theatre in the arch and agreeable person of Julia Marlowe, with a Taber wedding ring. The unexpected has happened in Miss Marlowe's case. She has deliberately and unostentatiously improved. I was a trifle afraid that she was going to be rather hasty and ready, and a futile effort to "boom" her as a "society" attraction, that was attempted just before she opened, very nearly damaged her prospects irreparably. Her foolish and ill-advised managers actually wanted it to be understood that Miss Julia Marlowe was the darling of the Pansy de Snookies and of my Lady Tomnoddy. Such idiosyncrasy is almost incomprehensible.

We have one "society" Juliet, and she is at Daly's Theatre, catering, I suppose, to ladies in Metropolitan Opera House dresses, and young "craques" in Murray Hill clothes. That Juliet is Mrs. Potter, and her niece has landed her in a labyrinth of vulgarity. To receive "society" you must dress, and that is what Mrs. Potter does, as I think I've remarked before. Julia Marlowe is not so absurd, and that is why I deplore the stupidity of her managers who endeavored to awaken sartorial hopes.

Miss Marlowe is a sweet, winning, wholesome and delightful Juliet, and she played the balcony scene as I don't remember ever having seen it played before. You can understand her completely, and there was not a titter in the house when she told Romeo that it would be twenty years until tomorrow. You realized the fact that it couldn't be a day less with this ardent, enthusiastic maiden. It was this very speech that caused Mrs. Potter's audience to snail. It sounded so mummy-yummy. The "mask of night" was on this dear little Juliet's face, and her Romeo would have been a disgusting coxcomb if it had dared to think that she was "too quickly won."

Till dawn and be perverse, and say thee nay. So thou wilt woo, but not for the world. In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond.

But she wasn't. Not a bit of it. She was just fond enough to justify what in cold prosaic to-day would be looked upon as reprehensible forwardness. Mrs. Potter was too fond. Mrs. Potter was a brazen minx, leaning on her silken cushions, and "mashing" an inoffensive young man in the way she did. Miss Marlowe's wooing was a poem from beginning to end. I don't wonder that Duse arose in her box and applauded the little actress until she split her gloves. I do not marvel at Sarah's enthusiasm. If the New York public want Juliet they can see her precisely as she should be at Palmer's Theatre. Every movement was graceful and graceful. There was not a vestige of theatricalism about the impersonation. Miss Marlowe's Juliet is the Juliet of to-day. Nobody can wish for a better.

Let us hope that Miss Marlowe will not be indiscreet enough to grow fat. There is a tendency to ennui in her carriage that should be carefully looked after. I have no doubt that this young woman, with her newly acquired Taber, wants to be the Mrs. Kendal of the American stage. We are quite willing to accept Mr. and Mrs. Taber as a model stage couple—and everybody likes to see a husband and wife playing lovers on the stage—but we must ask Mrs. Taber to imitate merely the art and the conjugal devotion of Mrs. Kendal, steering away from that lady's elephantine graces.

Robert Taber is not at all the sort of Romeo who, with "love's light wings," would "o'erperch" Mr. Capulet's garden wall. He is rather a tame lover, but perhaps the young lady dutifully subordinated himself to his charming wife. A line on the programme to this effect would be a great relief, and all would be immediately forgiven. Mrs. Sol Smith, as the Nurse, gives a capital performance. In fact, we have two excellent nurses in New York City in the shape of Mrs. Sol Smith and

Mrs. W. G. Jones. The other characters call for very little mention. They are not well interpreted, and bear the stamp of "the road" writ indelibly upon their manners.

I wonder if the merry Springtime will bring us any more Juliets. I hope not. The only actress I really want to see in the part is Eleanor Duse, and I'm not nearly as anxious about it as I was last week before I had seen Julia Marlowe.

George C. Mila has returned to the American stage. To tell you the truth, I never knew that he had left it, but the question is scarcely worth discussing now that—like the cat in the song—he has come back. I should very much like to know, however, where Mr. Mila has been during his alleged absence. Perhaps he has been taking lessons in voice production, for in "Julius Caesar" at the Broadway, his supply of voice is far larger than our modern demand for it. He has enough voice to fill three Metropolitan Opera Houses, and still spare a little for the more billion theatres. His interior laryngeal ligaments are in excellent order, and his glottis must be absolutely perfect. He works his thyroid, cricoid and arytenoid cartilages for all they are worth. They cannot last long if he puts them to such a severe test as he did last Wednesday night as Mark Anthony.

The production of "Julius Caesar" to-day by any actor that is not a recognized genius is a cruel and unintelligible action. The play, in good sooth, is monstrously prosy. Every boy at school should be forced to read it, for the sake of its superb language, but no theatregoer should be expected to sit through its weariness in the hope of a fleeting three hours' relaxation. Life is too short for "Julius Caesar" on the stage. Interpreted by bad actors. The Booth and Barrett production was something worth remembering; the George C. Mila presentation is something distinctly worth forgetting. The acting was so bad and the lines were so gloomily spoken that you were obliged to fall back on the "plot." Fancy falling back on the plot of "Julius Caesar" and trying to interest yourself in Roman politics!

ALAN DALE.



IDA CONQUEST
AS
"MUSETTE"

ARCHIE GUNN.